About the Painting: During the 1950s the economy boomed and many Americans enjoyed prosperity. However, while affluent suburban homeowners lounged in the privacy of their backyards, millions of other Americans lived in poverty.

In this module you will learn about the changes that took place in the United States after World War II.

What You Will Learn . . .

Lesson 1: Postwar America . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 976
The Big Idea The Truman and Eisenhower administrations led the nation to make social, economic, and political adjustments following World War II.

Lesson 2: The American Dream in the Fifties. . . . . . . . . . . . . . 984
The Big Idea During the 1950s the economy boomed, and many Americans enjoyed material comfort.

Lesson 3: Popular Culture. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 998
The Big Idea Mainstream Americans, as well as the nation’s subcultures, embraced new forms of entertainment during the 1950s.

Lesson 4: The Other America. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 1006
The Big Idea Amidst the prosperity of the 1950s, millions of Americans lived in poverty.
Timeline of Events 1945–1961

**United States Events**

- 1946 Baby boom begins.
- 1948 Harry S. Truman is elected president.
- 1949 Mao Zedong’s Communist forces gain control of China.
- 1950 Korean War begins.
- 1952 Dwight D. Eisenhower is elected president.
- 1953 Korean War cease-fire is signed.
- 1956 Eisenhower is reelected.
- 1958 NASA—National Aeronautics and Space Administration—is established.
- 1959 Alaska and Hawaii become the 49th and 50th states.
- 1960 John F. Kennedy is elected president.

**World Events**

- 1945
- 1949
- 1950
- 1954
- 1956
- 1957
- 1959
One American’s Story

Sam Gordon had been married less than a year when he was shipped overseas in July 1943. As a sergeant in the United States Army, he fought in Belgium and France during World War II. Arriving back home in November 1945, Sam nervously anticipated a reunion with his family. A friend, Donald Katz, described Sam’s reactions.

“So Sam bulled through the crowd and hailed a taxi. The cab motored north through the warm autumn day as he groped for feelings appropriate to being back home alive from a terrible war. . . . [He was] nearly panting under the weight of fear. . . . Back home alive . . . married to a girl I haven’t seen since 1943 . . . father of a child I’ve never seen at all.”

—Donald Katz, from *Home Fires*

Sam Gordon met his daughter, Susan, for the first time the day he returned home from the war, and he went to work the next morning. Like many other young couples, the Gordons began to put the nightmare of the war behind them and return to normality.
Readjustment and Recovery

By the summer of 1946, about 10 million men and women had been released from the armed forces. Veterans like Sam Gordon—along with the rest of American society—settled down to rebuild their lives.

THE IMPACT OF THE GI BILL During the war, patriotism was high. As veterans returned home, the federal government committed to help ease their return to civilian life. Congress passed the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, or the GI Bill of Rights, in 1944. In addition to encouraging veterans to get an education by paying part of their tuition, the GI Bill guaranteed them a year’s worth of unemployment benefits while job hunting. It also offered low-interest, federally guaranteed loans. Millions of young families used these benefits to buy homes and farms or to establish businesses.

HOUSING CRISIS In 1945 and 1946 returning veterans faced a severe housing shortage. Many families lived in cramped apartments or moved in with relatives. In addition, the years after World War II saw a sharp increase in birth rates. In response to the population growth and housing crisis, developers like William Levitt and Henry Kaiser used efficient, assembly-line methods to mass-produce houses. Levitt bragged that his company could build a house in 16 minutes. He offered homes in small residential communities surrounding cities, called suburbs, for less than $7,000.

Levitt’s first postwar development—rows of standardized homes built on treeless lots—was located on New York’s Long Island and named Levittown. These homes looked exactly alike, and certain zoning laws ensured that they would stay the same. Despite their rigid conformity, Americans loved the openness and small-town feel to the planned suburbs. With the help of the GI Bill, many veterans and their families moved in and cultivated a new lifestyle.

REDEFINING THE FAMILY Tension created by changes in men’s and women’s roles after the war contributed to a rising divorce rate. Traditionally, men were the breadwinners and heads of households, while women were expected to stay home and care for the family. During the war, however, about 8 million women, 75 percent of whom were married, entered the paid workforce. These women supported their families and made important household decisions. Many were reluctant to give up their newfound independence when their husbands returned. Although most women did leave their jobs, by 1950 more than a million war marriages had ended in divorce.
A Dynamic Economy

ECONOMIC READJUSTMENT After World War II, the United States converted from a wartime to a peacetime economy. The U.S. government immediately canceled war contracts totaling $35 billion, and more than a million defense workers were laid off. Unemployment increased as veterans joined laid-off defense workers in the search for jobs. The government vowed to tackle this problem. In February 1946 President Truman signed the Employment Act of 1946. This act stated that the government would do everything in its power to bring about full employment and a stable economy. At the peak of postwar unemployment in March 1946, nearly 3 million people were seeking work.

Rising unemployment was not the nation’s only postwar economic problem, however. During the war, the Office of Price Administration (OPA) had halted inflation by imposing maximum prices on goods. When these controls ended on June 30, 1946, prices skyrocketed. In the next two weeks, the cost of consumer products soared 25 percent, double the increase of the previous three years. In some cities, consumers stood in long lines, hoping to buy scarce items such as sugar, coffee, and beans. Shortages caused prices to continue to rise for the next two years, until the supply of goods caught up with the demand.

While prices spiraled upward, many American workers also earned less than they had earned during the war. To halt runaway inflation and to help the nation convert to a peacetime economy, Congress eventually reestablished controls similar to the wartime controls on prices, wages, and rents.

REMARKABLE RECOVERY Most economists who had forecast a postwar depression were proved wrong because they had failed to consider consumers’ pent-up accumulation of needs and wants. People had gone without many goods for so long that by the late 1940s, with more than $135 billion in savings from defense work, service pay, and investments in war bonds, Americans suddenly had money to spend. They snatched up everything from automobiles to houses. After a brief period of postwar economic readjustment, the American economy boomed. The demand for goods and services outstripped the supply and increased production, which created new jobs. Many Americans prospered in the 1950s in what economist John Kenneth Galbraith called “the affluent society.”

The Cold War also contributed to economic growth. Concern over Soviet expansion kept American defense spending high and people employed. Foreign-aid programs like the Marshall Plan provided another boost to the American economy. By helping nations in Western Europe recover from the war, the United States created strong foreign markets for its exports.

Interpret Graphs

1. From 1950 to 1960, by what percentage did each of the economic indicators shown above increase?
2. Which years show the biggest increases for each of the graphs above?

Reading Check
Identify Problems
What problems did Americans face after World War II?
Meeting Economic Challenges

Despite an impressive recovery, Americans faced a number of economic problems. Their lives had been in turmoil throughout the war, and a desire for stability made the country more conservative.

**PRESIDENT TRUMAN’S INHERITANCE** When [Harry S. Truman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_S._Truman) suddenly became president after Franklin D. Roosevelt’s death in 1945, he asked Roosevelt’s widow, Eleanor, if there was anything he could do for her. She replied, “Is there anything we can do for you? For you are the one in trouble now.” In many ways, President Truman was in trouble.

> “I don’t know whether you fellows ever had a load of hay fall on you, but when they told me yesterday what had happened [Roosevelt’s death], I felt like the moon, the stars, and all the planets had fallen on me.”

—Harry S. Truman, from a speech delivered April 13, 1945

Although he may have felt unprepared for the job, Truman was widely viewed as honorable, down-to-earth, and self-confident. Most important of all, he had the ability to make difficult decisions and to accept full responsibility for their consequences. As the plaque on his White House desk read, “The Buck Stops Here.” Truman faced two huge challenges: dealing with the rising threat of communism and restoring the American economy to a strong footing after the war’s end.

**TRUMAN FACES STRIKES** One economic problem that Truman had to address was strikes. During World War II, labor unions had agreed not to strike or seek pay raises. Conditions had not changed, however, after the war was over. Facing higher prices and lower wages, 4.5 million discontented workers, including steelworkers, coal miners, and railroad workers, went on strike in 1946 for better pay. Although he generally supported organized labor, Truman refused to let strikes cripple the nation. He threatened to draft the striking workers and to order them as soldiers to stay on the job. He authorized the federal government to seize the mines, and he threatened to take control of the railroads as well. Truman appeared before Congress and asked for the authority to draft the striking railroad workers into the army. Before he could finish his speech, the unions gave in.

> “HAD ENOUGH?”

Disgusted by shortages of goods, rising inflation, and labor strikes, Americans were ready for a change. The Republicans asked the public, “Had enough?” Voters gave their answer at the polls. In the 1946 congressional elections, the Republican Party won control of both the Senate and the House of Representatives for the first time since 1928. The new 80th Congress ignored Truman’s domestic proposals. In 1947 Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act over Truman’s veto. This bill reduced the strength of organized labor and overturned many rights won by the unions under the New Deal.
Social Unrest Persists

Problems arose not only in the economy but in the very fabric of society. After World War II, a wave of racial violence erupted in the South. Many African Americans, particularly those who had served in the armed forces during the war, demanded their rights as citizens.

TRUMAN SUPPORTS CIVIL RIGHTS  Truman put his presidency on the line for civil rights. “I am asking for equality of opportunity for all human beings,” he said, “... and if that ends up in my failure to be reelected, that failure will be in a good cause.” In 1946 Truman created a President’s Commission on Civil Rights. Following the group’s recommendations, Truman asked Congress for several measures. These included a federal antilynching law, a ban on the poll tax as a voting requirement, and a permanent civil rights commission.

Congress refused to pass these measures, or a measure to integrate the armed forces. As a result, Truman himself took action. In July 1948 he issued an executive order for integration of the armed forces, calling for “equality of treatment and opportunity in the armed forces without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.” In addition, he ordered an end to discrimination in the hiring of government employees. The Supreme Court also ruled that the lower courts could not bar African Americans from residential neighborhoods. These actions represented the beginnings of a federal commitment to dealing with racial issues.

THE 1948 ELECTION  Although many Americans blamed Truman for the nation’s inflation and labor unrest, the Democrats nominated him for president in 1948. To protest Truman’s emphasis on civil rights, a number of

Vocabulary

discrimination  treatment based on class or category rather than individual merit

Jackie Robinson (1919–1972)

Jackie Robinson took a brave step when he turned the Brooklyn Dodgers into an integrated baseball team in 1947. But he—and the country—had a long way to go.

Unhappy fans hurled insults at Robinson from the stands. Some players on opposing teams tried to hit him with pitches or to injure him with the spikes on their shoes. He even received death threats. He endured this with poise and restraint, saying, “Plenty of times, I wanted to haul off when somebody insulted me for the color of my skin but I had to hold myself. I knew I was kind of an experiment.”

In 1949, Robinson was voted the National League’s most valuable player. He later became the first African American to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.
Southern Democrats—who became known as Dixiecrats—formed the States’ Rights Democratic Party. They nominated their own presidential candidate, Governor J. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina. Discontent reigned at the far left of the Democratic spectrum as well. The former vice-president Henry A. Wallace led his supporters out of mainstream Democratic ranks to form a more liberal Progressive Party.

As the election approached, opinion polls gave the Republican candidate, New York governor Thomas E. Dewey, a comfortable lead. Refusing to believe the polls, Truman poured his energy into the campaign. First, he called the Republican-dominated Congress into a special session. He challenged it to pass laws supporting such elements of the Democratic Party platform as public housing, federal aid to education, a higher minimum wage, and extended Social Security coverage. Not one of these laws was passed. Then he took his campaign to the people. He traveled from one end of the country to the other by train, speaking from the rear platform in a sweeping “whistlestop campaign.” Day after day, people heard the president denounce the “do-nothing, 80th Congress.”

**STUNNING UPSET** Truman’s “Give ‘em hell, Harry” campaign worked. He won the election in a close political upset. The Democrats gained control of Congress as well, even though they suffered losses in the South, which had been solidly Democratic since Reconstruction.
THE FAIR DEAL  After his victory, Truman continued proposing an ambitious economic program. Truman’s Fair Deal, an extension of Roosevelt’s New Deal, included proposals for a nationwide system of compulsory health insurance and a crop-subsidy system to provide a steady income for farmers. These ideas were opposed by powerful business interests, including the American Medical Association and the Farm Bureau Federation, who worked against these proposals. In Congress, some Northern Democrats joined Dixiecrats and Republicans in defeating both measures.

In other instances, however, Truman’s ideas prevailed. Congress raised the hourly minimum wage from 40 cents to 75 cents. They extended Social Security coverage to about 10 million more people and initiated flood control and irrigation projects. Congress passed the Employment Act in 1946, which recognized government’s responsibility to help achieve full employment. Congress also provided financial support for cities to clear out slums and build 810,000 housing units for low-income families.

Overall, though, the Fair Deal had limited success in an increasingly conservative postwar political climate. Americans had become less enthusiastic about reform programs that would further expand the government. Most people, weary of the upheavals of recent years, just wanted peace, stability, and gradual prosperity.

Republicans Take the Middle Road

Despite these social and economic victories, Truman’s approval rating sank to an all-time low of 23 percent in 1951. The stalemate in the Korean War and the rising tide of McCarthyism, which cast doubt on the loyalty of some federal employees, became overwhelming issues. Truman decided not to run for reelection in 1952. The year before, the states had ratified the Twenty-Second Amendment, which limited the number of times a president could be elected to two. Although Truman was specifically excluded from the amendment’s limits, he felt he had served long enough. The Democrats nominated the intellectual and articulate governor Adlai Stevenson of Illinois to run against the Republican candidate, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, known popularly as “Ike.”

I LIKE IKE!  During the campaign, the Republicans accused the Democrats of “plunder at home and blunder abroad.” To fan the anti-Communist hysteria that was sweeping over the country, Republicans raised the specter of the rise of communism in China and Eastern Europe. They also criticized the growing power of the federal government and the alleged bribery and corruption among Truman’s political allies.

Eisenhower’s campaign hit a snag, however, when newspapers accused his running mate, California senator Richard M. Nixon, of profiting from a secret slush fund set up by wealthy supporters. Nixon decided to reply to the charges. In an emotional speech to an audience of 58 million, now known as the “Checkers speech,” he exhibited masterful use of a new medium—television. Nixon denied any wrongdoing, but he did admit to accepting one gift from a political supporter.
“You know what it was? It was a little cocker spaniel dog in a crate, that he’d [the political supporter] sent all the way from Texas. Black and white spotted. And our little girl—Tricia, the six-year-old—named it Checkers. And you know the kids, like all kids, love the dog and I just want to say this right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we’re going to keep it.”

—Richard M. Nixon, from the “Checkers speech,” September 23, 1952

Nixon’s speech saved his place on the Republican ticket. In November 1952 Eisenhower won 55 percent of the popular vote and a majority of the Electoral College votes, while the Republicans narrowly captured Congress.

WALKING THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD  President Eisenhower’s style of governing differed from that of the Democrats. His approach, which he called “dynamic conservatism,” was also known as “Modern Republicanism.” He called for government to be “conservative when it comes to money and liberal when it comes to human beings.”

Eisenhower avoided many controversial issues. However, he could not completely sidestep a persistent domestic issue—civil rights—that gained national attention due to court rulings and acts of civil disobedience in the mid-1950s. The most significant judicial action occurred in 1954, when the Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka that public schools must be racially integrated. In a landmark act of civil disobedience a year later, a black seamstress named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man. Her arrest sparked a boycott of the entire Montgomery, Alabama, bus system. The civil rights movement had entered a new era.

Although Eisenhower did not lead on civil rights issues, he did press hard for programs that would bring about a balanced budget and a cut in taxes. During his two terms, Eisenhower’s administration raised the minimum wage, extended Social Security and unemployment benefits, increased funding for public housing, and backed the creation of interstate highways and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. His popularity soared, and he won reelection in 1956.

Lesson 1 Assessment

1. Organize Information  Create a timeline and record key events relating to postwar America.

   +---+---+---+---+---+
   | 1946 | 1947 | 1948 | 1949 | 1952 |

   Write a paragraph describing the effects of one of these events.

2. Key Terms and People  For each key term or person in the lesson, write a sentence explaining its significance.

3. Draw Conclusions  Do you think Eisenhower’s actions reflected his philosophy of dynamic conservatism? Why or why not?

   Think About:
   • the definition of dynamic conservatism
   • Eisenhower’s actions on civil rights policies
   • Eisenhower’s accomplishments on other domestic issues

4. Evaluate  Why do you think most Americans went along with Eisenhower’s conservative approach to domestic policy?

5. Contrast  How did Presidents Truman and Eisenhower differ regarding civil rights?
The American Dream in the Fifties

The Big Idea
During the 1950s the economy boomed and many Americans enjoyed material comfort.

Why It Matters Now
The “American dream,” a notion that was largely shaped by the 1950s, is still pursued today.

Key Terms and People
conglomerate
franchise
baby boom
Dr. Jonas Salk
consumerism
planned obsolescence

One American’s Story
Settled into her brand new house near San Diego, California, Carol Freeman felt very fortunate. Her husband Mark had his own law practice, and when their first baby was born, she became a full-time homemaker. She was living the American dream. Yet Carol felt dissatisfied—as if there were “something wrong” with her because she was not happy.

“As dissatisfied as I was, and as restless, I remember so well this feeling [we] had at the time that the world was going to be your oyster. You were going to make money, your kids were going to go to good schools, everything was possible if you just did what you were supposed to do. The future was rosy. There was a tremendous feeling of optimism. . . . Much as I say it was hateful, it was also hopeful. It was an innocent time.”

—Carol Freeman, quoted in The Fifties: A Women’s Oral History

After World War II ended, Americans turned their attention to their families and jobs. The economy prospered. New technologies and business ideas created fresh opportunities for many. By the end of the decade, Americans were enjoying the highest standard of living in the world. The American dream of a happy and successful life seemed within the reach of many people.
The Organization and the Organization Man

During the 1950s businesses expanded rapidly. Some 5,000 companies merged to form larger corporations. American factories were changing as well. Throughout the 1950s companies introduced machines that could perform industrial operations faster and more efficiently than human workers. This process of automation increased productivity, but it also reduced the amount of manufacturing jobs. As the number of blue-collar, or industrial, jobs decreased, professional and service jobs increased. Huge new corporations required a multitude of managers and clerical workers, positions referred to as white-collar jobs.

CONGLOMERATES  Many white-collar workers performed their services in large corporations or government agencies. Some of these corporations continued expanding by forming conglomerates. (A conglomerate is a major corporation that includes a number of smaller companies in unrelated industries.) For example, one conglomerate, International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT), whose original business was communications, bought car-rental companies, insurance companies, and hotel and motel chains. Through this diversification, or investment in various areas of the economy, ITT tried to protect itself from declines in individual industries. Other huge parent companies included American Telephone and Telegraph, Xerox, and General Electric.

FRANCHISES  In addition to diversifying, another strategy for business expansion—franchising—developed at this time. A franchise is a company that offers similar products or services in many locations. (Franchise is also used to refer to the right, sold to an individual, to do business using the parent company’s name and the system that the parent company developed.)

Franchises

In the decades since Ray Kroc opened his first McDonald’s restaurant, franchising has become all but a way of life in the United States.

Today, nearly 3,000 franchised companies operate over 500,000 businesses throughout the country. Officials estimate that franchises account for nearly one-third of all U.S. retail sales. American franchises today provide a wide array of goods and services, from car maintenance to tax services to hair care.

In an attempt to tap into the international market, hundreds of U.S. companies have established overseas franchises. The franchise with perhaps the greatest global reach is the one that started it all. In addition to its more than 13,000 U.S. franchises, McDonald’s now operates over 18,600 franchises in dozens of countries around the world.
Fast-food restaurants developed some of the first and most successful franchises. McDonald’s, for example, had its start at a small drive-in restaurant in San Bernardino, California. The McDonald brothers developed unusually efficient service, based on assembly-line methods. They simplified the menu, featured 15-cent hamburgers, and mechanized their kitchen.

Salesman Ray Kroc paid the McDonalds $2.7 million for the franchise rights to their hamburger drive-in. In April 1955 he opened his first McDonald’s restaurant in Des Plaines, Illinois. There he further improved the assembly-line process and introduced the trademark arches that are now familiar all over the world.

“It requires a certain kind of mind to see the beauty in a hamburger bun. Yet is it any more unusual to find grace in the texture and softly curved silhouette of a bun than to reflect lovingly on the . . . arrangements and textures and colors in a butterfly’s wings? . . . Not if you view the bun as an essential material in the art of serving a great many meals fast.”

—Ray Kroc, quoted in The Fifties

SOCIAL CONFORMITY While franchises like McDonald’s helped standardize what people ate, some American workers found themselves becoming standardized as well. Employees who were well paid and held secure jobs in thriving companies sometimes paid a price for economic advancement. The price was a loss of their individuality. In general, businesses did not want creative thinkers, rebels, or anyone who would rock the corporate boat.

The Organization Man is a book based on a classic 1956 study of suburban Park Forest, Illinois, and other communities. In it, William H. Whyte described how the new, large organizations created “company people.” Companies would give personality tests to people applying for jobs to make sure they would “fit in” the corporate culture. Companies rewarded employees for teamwork, cooperation, and loyalty. These qualities contributed to the growth of conformity, which Whyte called “belongingness.” Despite their success, a number of workers questioned whether pursuing the American dream exacted too high a price, as rigid conformity replaced individuality.

UNIONS Changes in the workplace also influenced organized labor. Boosted in part by the merger of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1955, union membership grew in the 1950s. To help workers improve their economic position, union leaders sought to cooperate with management. Many unions fought for and won guaranteed annual wages and cost-of-living adjustments—automatic pay raises linked to the rate of inflation.
Union support weakened in the late 1950s when newspapers reported widespread corruption and linked many unions to organized crime. Congress attempted to crack down on union corruption. Carey Estes Kefauver, a senator from Tennessee, had already launched hearings earlier in the decade to investigate organized crime in the United States. These hearings were widely followed by the American public and led to the passage of new laws. The negative publicity hurt union membership, which declined steadily after 1957. During the next decade, Attorney General Robert Kennedy would continue to fight organized crime. Several union leaders, including Teamsters union president Jimmy Hoffa, would be sent to prison.

**The Suburban Lifestyle**

Achieving job security took a psychological toll on some Americans who resented having to repress their own personalities. However, it also enabled people to provide their families with the so-called good things in life. Most Americans worked in cities, but fewer and fewer of them lived there. New highways and the availability and affordability of automobiles and gasoline made commuting possible. By the early 1960s every large city in the United States was surrounded by suburbs. Of the 13 million new homes built in the 1950s, 85 percent were built in the suburbs. For many people, the suburbs embodied the American dream of an affordable single-family house, good schools, a safe, healthy environment for children, and congenial neighbors just like themselves.

**American Birthrate, 1940–1970**

*First year for which figures include Alaska and Hawaii.

Source: Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970

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**Interpret Graphs**

1. What was the overall trend in the birthrate at the start of World War II, and after the war ended?
2. What was the difference in the birthrate between 1960 and 1970?
THE BABY BOOM  As soldiers returned from World War II and settled into family life, they contributed to an unprecedented population explosion known as the baby boom. During the late 1940s and through the early 1960s, the birthrate (number of live births per 1,000 people) in the United States soared. At the height of the baby boom, in 1957, one American infant was born every seven seconds—a total of 4,308,000 that year. The result was the largest generation in the nation’s history.

Many factors contributed to the size of the baby-boom generation. These included the reunion of husbands and wives after the war, decreasing marriage age, desirability of large families, confidence in continued economic prosperity, and advances in medicine.

ADVANCES IN MEDICINE AND CHILDCARE  Among the medical advances that saved hundreds of thousands of children’s lives was the discovery of drugs to fight and prevent childhood diseases, such as typhoid fever. Another breakthrough came when Dr. Jonas Salk developed a vaccine for the crippling disease poliomyelitis—polio. Polio was an infectious disease that often struck children. When polio hit, it spread quickly, and many of its victims died. Fear of the disease caused families to dramatically alter their daily lives during outbreaks, keeping children out of school for weeks at a time. After the development of the polio vaccine, children began receiving the shot and the number of polio cases plunged.

Many parents raised their children according to guidelines devised by pediatrician and author Dr. Benjamin Spock. His Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care, published in 1946, sold nearly 10 million copies during the 1950s. In it, he advised parents not to spank or scold their children. He also encouraged families to hold meetings in which children could express themselves. He considered it so important for mothers to be at home with their children that he proposed having the government pay mothers to stay home.

### BIOGRAPHY

**Jonas Salk** (1914–1995)

One of the most feared diseases in the 1950s was polio, the disease that had partially paralyzed President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Polio afflicted 58,000 American children in 1952. It killed some children and made others reliant on crutches, wheelchairs, or iron lungs (machines that helped people with paralyzed chest muscles to breathe).

In the early 1950s Dr. Jonas Salk developed an effective vaccine to prevent the disease. The government sponsored a free inoculation program for children. The vaccine was extremely effective.

By 1974, thanks to Salk’s vaccine and a new oral vaccine developed by Dr. Albert Sabin, only seven new polio cases were reported in the country.
The baby boom had a tremendous impact not only on childcare but on the American economy and the educational system as well. In 1958 toy sales alone reached $1.25 billion. During the decade, 10 million new students entered the elementary schools. The sharp increase in enrollment caused overcrowding and teacher shortages in many parts of the country. In California, a new school opened every seven days.

Competition with the Soviet Union caused many Americans to wonder if a decline in the nation’s schools had enabled the Soviets to surpass the United States in technological achievements. In response to this concern, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act in 1958, which provided hundreds of millions of dollars for education in the United States. This legislation included funding for additional loans for college students. It also provided for improved science, math, and foreign language instruction in elementary and secondary schools.

**WOMEN’S ROLES** During the 1950s the role of homemaker and mother was glorified in popular magazines, movies, and TV programs such as *Father Knows Best* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. *Time* magazine described the homemaker as “the key figure in all suburbia, the thread that weaves between family and community—the keeper of the suburban dream.” In contrast to the ideal portrayed in the media, however, some women, like Carol Freeman, who spoke of her discontentment, were not happy with their roles. They felt isolated, bored, and unfulfilled. According to one survey in the 1950s, more than one-fifth of suburban wives were dissatisfied with their lives. Betty Friedan, author of the groundbreaking 1963 book about women and society, *The Feminine Mystique*, described the problem.

“For the first time in their history, women are becoming aware of an identity crisis in their own lives, a crisis which . . . has grown worse with each succeeding generation. . . . I think this is the crisis of women growing up—a turning point from an immaturity that has been called femininity to full human identity.”

—Betty Friedan, from *The Feminine Mystique*

The number of women working outside the home rose steadily during the decade. By 1960 almost 40 percent of mothers with children between ages 6 and 17 held paying jobs.

But having a job didn’t necessarily contribute to a woman’s happiness. A woman’s career opportunities tended to be limited to fields such as nursing, teaching, and office support. These positions paid less than other professional and business positions did. Women also earned less than men for comparable work. Although increasing numbers of women attended four-year colleges, the percentage of women college students in the 1950s was smaller than the 1920s. Female students generally received little financial, academic, or psychological encouragement to pursue their goals. Remarkably, in a 1962 Gallup poll of 2,300 women, more than 90 percent hoped that their daughters would be better educated and would lead different lives than they had.
LEISURE IN THE FIFTIES Most Americans of the 1950s had more leisure time than ever before. Employees worked a 40-hour week and earned several weeks’ vacation per year. Scientific advances led to more labor-saving devices. Washing machines, clothes dryers, dishwashers, and power lawn mowers allowed more time for leisure activities. *Fortune* magazine reported that, in 1953, Americans spent more than $30 billion on leisure goods and activities.

Americans also enjoyed a wide variety of recreational pursuits—both active and passive. Millions of people participated in such sports as fishing, bowling, hunting, boating, and golf. More fans than ever attended baseball, basketball, and football games. Others watched professional sports on television.

Americans also became avid readers. They devoured books about cooking, religion, do-it-yourself projects, and homemaking. They also read mysteries, romance novels, and fiction by popular writers such as Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Daphne du Maurier, and J. D. Salinger. Book sales doubled, due in part to a thriving paperback market. The circulation of popular magazines like *Reader’s Digest* and *Sports Illustrated* steadily rose, from about 148 million to more than 190 million readers. Sales of comic books also reached a peak in the mid-1950s.

**Document-Based Investigation Historical Source**

"Little Boxes"

In a popular protest song, Malvina Reynolds sings about boxes lining a hillside. She is referring to the suburban housing developments that were planned and built in the 1950s. Ticky-tacky is the cheap, shoddy building material that was used to construct the homes. The song continues to say that the people who live in the boxes are also “all made out of ticky-tacky” and “all look just the same.”

*“Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes made of ticky-tacky,
Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes all the same.
There’s a pink one and a green one,
And a blue one and a yellow one,
And they’re all made out of ticky-tacky,
And they all look just the same.”*  
—Malvina Reynolds, from “Little Boxes”

**Analyze Historical Sources**  
What statement do you think this song is making about planned suburban neighborhoods?
Suburban life during this time encouraged conformity. In addition to buying the same consumer items and reading the same publications, many suburban families participated in the same social activities as their neighbors. Adults joined Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) and religious organizations, while children took up scouting and sports. For uprooted Americans in the suburbs, participation in these shared social activities provided a sense of belonging. Television and other popular media reinforced the image of the sameness of suburban lives. Media helped to create the stereotype that all suburban Americans were alike regardless of where they lived and worked.

The Automobile Culture
During World War II the U.S. government had rationed gasoline and converted many automobile factories for wartime use. Postwar changes made cars appealing and, in some cases, necessary.

**GROWING DEPENDENCE ON CARS** After the war automobiles joined the list of products once again widely available for purchase. Also, an abundance of petroleum—the raw material from which gasoline is made—led to inexpensive, plentiful fuel for consumers. Easy credit terms and extensive advertising persuaded Americans to buy cars in record numbers. New car sales rose from 6.7 million in 1950 to 7.9 million in 1955. The number of private cars on the road jumped from 40 million in 1950 to over 60 million in 1960.

Suburban living made owning a car a necessity. Most of the new suburbs did not offer public transportation. People had to drive to their jobs in the cities. Also, many of the schools, stores, synagogues, churches, and doctors’ and dentists’ offices were not within walking distance of suburban homes.

The interstate highway system made travel much easier and faster.
THE INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM  The more cars there were, the more roads were needed. “Automania” spurred local and state governments to construct roads. These roads linked the major cities while connecting schools, shopping centers, and workplaces to residential suburbs, which were booming along with the population. In 1956 President Eisenhower signed the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act of 1956. The act was funded in 1957 and authorized the building of a nationwide highway network—41,000 miles of expressways. The new roads, in turn, encouraged the development of new suburbs farther from the cities.

Interstate highways also made high-speed, long-haul trucking possible, which contributed to a decline in the commercial use of railroads. Towns located along the new highways prospered, while towns situated along the older, smaller roads experienced hard times. The system of highways also helped unify and homogenize the nation. As John Keats observed in his 1958 book, The Insolent Chariots, “Our new roads, with their ancillaries, the motels, filling stations, and restaurants advertising Eats, have made it possible for you to drive from Brooklyn to Los Angeles without a change of diet, scenery, or culture.”

With access to cars, affordable gas, and new highways, more and more Americans hit the road. They flocked to mountains, lakes, national parks, historic sites, and amusement parks for family vacations. Disneyland, which opened in California in July 1955, attracted 3 million visitors the next year.

MOBILITY TAKES ITS TOLL  As the automobile industry boomed, it stimulated production and provided jobs in other areas, such as drive-in movies, restaurants, and shopping malls. Yet cars also created new problems for both society and the environment. Noise and exhaust polluted the air. Automobile accidents claimed more lives every year. Traffic jams raised people’s stress levels. Heavy use damaged the roads. Because cars made it possible for Americans to live in suburbs, many upper-class and middle-class whites

Vocabulary

homogenize  to make the same or similar

Southern California and the Automobile

No state has exemplified automania in the United States more than California. By the late 1990s Californians owned more cars, held more driver’s licenses, and traveled more miles on their roads than the people of any other state. The center of this automobile culture is the metropolitan area of Los Angeles.

Contributing to the importance of the automobile is Southern California’s suburban lifestyle. This dependence on cars has contributed to problems of air pollution and traffic jams. But, California is addressing these problems. It is reviving public transportation systems and promoting the use of electric cars that produce no pollution.
left the crowded cities. Jobs and businesses eventually followed them to the suburbs. Public transportation declined. Poor people in the inner cities were often left without jobs and vital services. As a result, the economic gulf between suburban and urban dwellers and between the middle class and the poor widened.

**Consumerism Unbound**

By the mid-1950s nearly 60 percent of Americans were members of the middle class, about twice as many as before World War II. They wanted, and had the money to buy, increasing numbers of products. Consumerism, buying material goods, came to be equated with success.

**NEW PRODUCTS** One new product after another appeared in the marketplace, as new technologies emerged and various industries responded to consumer demand. *Newsweek* magazine reported in 1956 that “hundreds of brand-new goods have become commonplace overnight.” Consumers purchased electric household appliances—such as washing machines, clothes dryers, blenders, freezers, and dishwashers—in record numbers.

With more and more leisure time to fill, people invested in recreational items. They bought televisions, tape recorders, and the new hi-fi (high-fidelity) record players. They bought casual clothing to suit their suburban lifestyles as well as power lawn mowers, barbecue grills, swimming pools, and lawn decorations for their suburban homes.

**PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE** In addition to creating new products, manufacturers began using a marketing strategy called planned obsolescence. In order to encourage consumers to purchase more goods, manufacturers purposely designed products to become obsolete. That is, products were designed to wear out or become outdated in a short period of time. Carmakers brought out new models every year, urging consumers to stay up-to-date. Because of planned obsolescence, Americans came to expect new and better products. They began to discard items that were sometimes barely used. Some observers commented that American culture was on its way to becoming a “throwaway society.”

**BUY NOW, PAY LATER** Many consumers made their purchases on credit and therefore did not have to pay for them right away. The Diner’s Club issued the first credit card in 1950, and the American Express card was introduced in 1958. These first cards were fairly exclusive, carrying a high fee which limited their use to middle-class people. In addition, people bought large items on the installment plan and made regular payments over a fixed time. Home mortgages (loans for buying a house) and automobile loans worked the same way. During the decade, the total private debt grew from $73 billion to $179 billion. Instead of saving money, Americans were spending it, confident that prosperity would continue. As a result, consumer debt became a crucial engine driving the U.S. economy.
The advertising industry capitalized on this runaway consumerism by encouraging even more spending. Ads were everywhere—in newspapers and magazines, on radio and television, and on billboards along the highways. The ads prompted people to buy goods that ranged from cars to cereals to cigarettes. Advertisers spent about $6 billion in 1950. By 1955 the figure was up to $9 billion. Since most Americans had satisfied their basic needs, advertisers tried to convince them to buy things they really didn’t need.

“On May 18, 1956, The New York Times printed a remarkable interview with a young man named Gerald Stahl, executive vice-president of the Package Designers Council. He stated: ‘Psychiatrists say that people have so much to choose from that they want help—they will like the package that hypnotizes them into picking it.’ He urged food packers to put more hypnosis into their package designing, so that the housewife will stick out her hand for it rather than one of many rivals.

Mr. Stahl has found that it takes the average woman exactly twenty seconds to cover an aisle in a supermarket if she doesn’t tarry. So a good package design should hypnotize the woman like a flashlight waved in front of her eyes.”

—Vance Packard, from The Hidden Persuaders

In the 1950s, advertisers made “keeping up with the Joneses” a way of life for consumers.
More and more, ad executives and designers turned to psychology to create new strategies for selling. Advertisers appealed to people’s desire for status and “belongingness.” They strived to associate their products with those values. For example, Cadillac ads appealed to the desire for status and mouthwash ads held the promise of social acceptance.

Television became a powerful new advertising tool. The first one-minute TV commercial was produced in 1941 at a cost of $9. In 1960 advertisers spent a total of $1.6 billion for television ads. By 2001 a 30-second commercial during the Super Bowl cost an advertiser $2.2 million. Television had become not only the medium for mass transmission of cultural values, but a symbol of popular culture itself.

1. **Organize Information** Use a graphic organizer to list examples of specific goals that characterized the American dream for suburbanites in the 1950s.

   - **The American Dream**
   - Values
   - Home/Family
   - Work
   - Examples
   - Examples
   - Examples

   What do you think the most important goal was?

2. **Key Terms and People** For each key term or person in the lesson, write a sentence explaining its significance.

3. **Analyze Effects** In what ways do you think current environmental consciousness is related to the “throwaway society” of the 1950s? Support your answer.

   **Think About:**
   - the purchasing habits of 1950s consumers
   - the effects of planned obsolescence
   - today’s emphasis on recycling

4. **Analyze Effects** Analyze how technological and scientific advancements impacted daily life for Americans in the 1950s. How did the daily lives of mothers and housekeepers change?

5. **Evaluate** Do you think that the life of a typical suburban homemaker during the 1950s was fulfilling or not? Support your answer.

6. **Analyze Primary Sources** This ad is typical of how the advertising industry portrayed housewives in the 1950s. What message about women is conveyed by this ad?
The Road to Suburbia

“Come out to Park Forest where small-town friendships grow—and you still live so close to a big city.” Advertisements like this one for a scientifically planned Chicago suburb captured the lure of the suburbs for thousands of growing families in the 1950s. The publicity promised affordable housing, congenial neighbors, fresh air and open spaces, good schools, and easy access to urban jobs and culture. Good transportation was the lifeline of suburban growth a half century ago, and it continues to spur expansion today.

WHERE THE ‘BURBS ARE

Park Forest was planned from its conception in 1945 to be a “complete community for middle-income families with children.” The setting was rural—amidst cornfields and forest preserves about 30 miles south of Chicago. But it was convenient to commuter lines, like the Illinois Central (IC) Railroad, and to major roads, such as Western Avenue.
THE COMMUTER CRUSH
Men commuted to work on the IC railroad, while their wives usually stayed home to take care of the children, who thrived in Park Forest’s safe, wholesome family environment.

SHOPPING CENTERS
Consumerism became a driving force in the 1950s, and Park Forest kept up with the trend. The central shopping center served the community well until the late 1960s. When Interstate 57 was constructed, a mammoth mall built just off the highway caused the original shopping area to decline. Park Forest is still struggling to revive its central shopping area.

SHARED PRIVACY
By 1952, development in Park Forest, Illinois had expanded to include both low-cost rental units and single-family homes. All the streets were curved to slow traffic, present a pleasing sweep of space, and give residents maximum privacy and space for yards.

Critical Thinking
1. Analyze Effects  How did the availability of transportation influence the creation and ongoing development of Park Forest?

2. Create a Database  Pose a historical question about a suburb near you. Collect statistics about changes in population, living patterns, income, and economic development in that suburb. Use those statistics to create a database that will help answer your questions.
The Big Idea
Mainstream Americans, as well as the nation’s subcultures, embraced new forms of entertainment during the 1950s.

Why It Matters Now
Television and rock ‘n’ roll, integral parts of the nation’s culture today, emerged during the post-war era.

Key Terms and People
mass media
Federal Communications Commission (FCC)
beat movement
rock ‘n’ roll
jazz

One American’s Story
H. B. Barnum was a 14-year-old saxophone player who later became a music producer. He was one of many teenagers in the 1950s drawn to a new style of music that featured hard-driving African American rhythm and blues. Barnum described the first time he saw the rhythm-and-blues performer Richard Wayne Penniman, better known as Little Richard.

“He’d just burst onto the stage from anywhere, and you wouldn’t be able to hear anything but the roar of the audience. . . . He’d be on the stage, he’d be off the stage, he’d be jumping and yelling, screaming, whipping the audience on. . . . Then when he finally did hit the piano and just went into di-di-di-di-di-di-di, you know, well nobody can do that as fast as Richard. It just took everybody by surprise.”

—H. B. Barnum, quoted in The Rise and Fall of Popular Music

Born poor, Little Richard wore flashy clothes on stage, curled his hair, and shouted the lyrics to his songs. As one writer observed, “In two minutes [he] used as much energy as an all-night party.” The music he and others performed became a prominent part of the American culture in the 1950s. It was a time when both mainstream America and those outside it embraced new and innovative forms of entertainment.
New Era of the Mass Media

Compared with other mass media—means of communication that reach large audiences—television developed with lightning speed. First widely available in 1948, television had reached 9 percent of American homes by 1950 and 55 percent of homes by 1954. In 1960 almost 90 percent—45 million—of American homes had television sets. Clearly, TV was the entertainment and information marvel of the postwar years.

THE RISE OF TELEVISION Early television sets were small boxes with round screens. Programming was meager, and broadcasts were in black and white. The first regular broadcasts, beginning in 1949, reached only a small part of the East Coast. It offered only two hours of programs per week. Post–World War II innovations such as microwave relays, which could transmit television waves over long distances, sent the television industry soaring. By 1956 the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) had allowed 500 new stations to broadcast. The FCC is the government agency that regulates and licenses television, telephone, telegraph, radio, and other communications industries.

This period of rapid expansion was the “golden age” of television entertainment. In the 1950s, entertainment often meant comedy. Milton Berle attracted huge audiences with The Texaco Star Theater. Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz’s early situation comedy, I Love Lucy, began its enormously popular run in 1951.

At the same time, veteran radio broadcaster Edward R. Murrow introduced two innovations. He introduced on-the-scene news reporting, with his program, See It Now (1951–1958), and interviewing, with Person to Person (1953–1960). Westerns, sports events, and original dramas shown on Playhouse 90 and Studio One offered entertainment variety. Children’s programs, such as The Mickey Mouse Club and The Howdy Doody Show, attracted many loyal young fans.

Interpret Graphs

1. During which decade did the number of households with TV sets increase the most?
2. During what period did TV viewing decline?
American businesses took advantage of the opportunities offered by the new television industry. Advertising expenditures on TV, which were $170 million in 1950, reached nearly $2 billion in 1960.

Sales of TV Guide, introduced in 1953, quickly outpaced sales of other magazines. In 1954 the food industry introduced a new convenience item, the frozen TV dinner. These dinners were complete, ready-to-heat individual meals on disposable aluminum trays. TV dinners made it easy for people to eat without missing their favorite shows.

STEREOTYPES AND GUNSLINGERS   Not everyone was thrilled with television, though. Critics objected to its effects on children and its stereotypical portrayal of women and minorities. Women did, in fact, appear in stereotypical roles, such as the ideal mothers of Father Knows Best and The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet. Male characters outnumbered women characters three to one. The programs portrayed primarily white, middle-class suburban experiences. African Americans and Hispanic Americans rarely appeared in television programs.

Television in the 1950s portrayed an idealized white America. For the most part, it omitted references to poverty, diversity, and contemporary conflicts, such as the struggle of the civil rights movement against racial discrimination. Instead, it glorified the historical conflicts of the western frontier in hit shows such as Gunsmoke and Have Gun Will Travel. The level of violence in these popular shows led to ongoing concerns about the effect of television on children. In 1961 Federal Communications Commission chairman Newton Minow voiced this concern to the leaders of the television industry.

“**When television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air . . . and keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland.”**

—Newton Minow, from a speech to the National Association of Broadcasters, Washington, DC, May 9, 1961

RADIO AND MOVIES   Although TV turned out to be wildly popular, radio and movies survived. But instead of competing with television’s mass market for drama and variety shows, radio stations turned to local programming of news, weather, music, and community issues. The strategy paid off. During the decade, radio advertising rose by 35 percent. The number of radio stations increased by 50 percent.

From the beginning, television cut into the profitable movie market. In 1948, 18,500 movie theaters had drawn nearly 90 million paid admissions per week. As more people stayed home to watch TV, the number of moviegoers...
decreased by nearly half. As early as 1951, producer David Selznick worried about Hollywood. “It’ll never come back. It’ll just keep on crumbling until finally the wind blows the last studio prop across the sands.”

But Hollywood did not crumble and blow away. Instead, it capitalized on the advantages that movies still held over television—size, color, and stereophonic sound. Stereophonic sound, which surrounded the viewer, was introduced in 1952. By 1954 more than 50 percent of movies were in color. By contrast, color television, which became available that year, did not become widespread until the next decade. In 1953, 20th Century Fox introduced CinemaScope, which projected a wide-angle image on a broad screen. The industry also tried novelty features. Smell-O-Vision and Aroma-Rama piped smells into the theaters to coincide with events shown on the screen. Three-dimensional images, viewed through special glasses supplied by the theaters, appeared to leap into the audience.

A Subculture Emerges

Although the mass media found a wide audience for their portrayals of mostly white popular culture, dissenting voices rang out throughout the 1950s. The messages of the beat movement in literature, and of rock ’n’ roll in music, clashed with the tidy suburban view of life. This set the stage for the counterculture that would burst forth in the late 1960s.

THE BEAT MOVEMENT Centered in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City’s Greenwich Village, the beat movement expressed the social and literary nonconformity of artists, poets, and writers. The word beat originally meant “weary” but came to refer as well to a musical beat.

Followers of this movement, called beats or beatniks, lived nonconformist lives. They tended to shun regular work. They sought a higher consciousness through Zen Buddhism, music, and, sometimes, drugs.
Many beat poets and writers believed in imposing as little structure as possible on their artistic works, which often had a free, open form. They read their poetry aloud in coffeehouses and other gathering places. Works that capture the essence of this era include Allen Ginsberg’s long, free-verse poem, Howl, published in 1956, and Jack Kerouac’s novel of the movement, On the Road, published in 1957. This novel describes a nomadic search across America for authentic experiences, people, and values.

Many mainstream Americans found this lifestyle less enchanting. LOOK magazine proclaimed, “There’s nothing really new about the beat philosophy. It consists merely of the average American’s value scale—turned inside out. The goals of the Beat are not watching TV, not wearing gray flannel, not owning a home in the suburbs, and especially—not working.” Nonetheless, the beatnik attitudes, way of life, and literature attracted the attention of the media and fired the imaginations of many college students.

African Americans and Rock ‘n’ Roll

While beats expressed themselves in unstructured literature, musicians in the 1950s added electronic instruments to traditional blues music, creating rhythm and blues. In 1951 a Cleveland, Ohio, radio disc jockey named Alan Freed was among the first to play the music. This audience was mostly white, but the music usually was produced by African American musicians. Freed’s listeners responded enthusiastically. Freed began promoting the new music that grew out of rhythm and blues and country and pop. He called the music rock ‘n’ roll, a name that has come to mean music that’s both black and white—music that is American.
ROCK ‘N’ ROLL  During the 1950s the teenage years began to be recognized as an important and unique developmental stage between childhood and adulthood. The booming postwar economy made it possible for teenagers to stay in school instead of working to help support their families and allowed their parents to give them generous allowances. In the early and mid-1950s, Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Bill Haley and His Comets, and especially Elvis Presley brought rock ‘n’ roll to a frantic pitch of popularity among the newly affluent teens who bought their records. The music’s heavy rhythm, simple melodies, and lyrics captivated teenagers across the country. Lyrics featured love, cars, and the problems of being young.

Elvis Presley became the unofficial “King of Rock ‘n’ Roll.” He first developed his musical style by singing in church and listening to gospel, country, and blues music on the radio in Memphis, Tennessee. When he was a young boy, his mother gave him a guitar. Years later he paid four dollars of his own money to record two songs in 1953. Sam Phillips, a rhythm-and-blues producer, ran Sun Studios in Memphis, where many early rock ‘n’ roll records were recorded. He discovered Presley and produced his first records. In 1955 Phillips sold Presley’s contract to RCA for $35,000.

Presley’s live appearances were immensely popular. Forty-five of his records sold over a million copies, including “Heartbreak Hotel,” “Hound Dog,” “All Shook Up,” “Don’t Be Cruel,” and “Burning Love.” LOOK magazine dismissed him as “a wild troubadour who wails rock ‘n’ roll tunes, flails erratically at a guitar, and wriggles like a peep-show dancer.” However, Presley’s rebellious style captivated young audiences. Girls screamed and fainted when he performed, and boys tried to imitate him.

Not surprisingly, many adults condemned rock ‘n’ roll. They believed that the new music would lead to teenage delinquency and immorality. In a few cities, rock ‘n’ roll concerts were banned. But despite this controversy, television and radio exposure helped bring rock ‘n’ roll into the mainstream. It became more acceptable by the end of the decade. Record sales, which were 189 million in 1950, grew with the popularity of rock ‘n’ roll, reaching 600 million in 1960.
THE RACIAL GAP  African American music had inspired the birth of rock ‘n’ roll. Many of the genre’s greatest performers were—like Berry and Little Richard—African Americans. In other musical genres, singers Nat “King” Cole and Lena Horne, singer and actor Harry Belafonte, and many others paved the way for minority representation in the entertainment fields. Musicians like Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk played a style of music characterized by the use of improvisation, called jazz. Earlier forms of jazz had evolved into a genre of music called swing, a fast, upbeat musical style that features big bands with strong rhythm sections. Swing music was widely popular before and during the war. Many of its stars were also African American, such as bandleaders Count Basie, Cab Calloway, and Duke Ellington. These artists entertained audiences of all races. Record studios such as Stax Records in Memphis, originally named Satellite Records, were beginning to put out R&B and southern soul records that appealed to white and black consumers alike.

But throughout the 1950s African American shows were mostly broadcast on separate stations. By 1954 there were 250 radio stations nationwide aimed specifically at African American listeners. African American stations were part of radio’s attempt to counter the mass popularity of television by targeting specific audiences. These stations also served advertisers who wanted to reach a large African American audience. But it was the black listeners who appreciated the stations most. They had fewer television sets than whites and did not find themselves reflected in mainstream programming. Thulani Davis, a poet, journalist, and playwright, expressed the feelings of one listener about African American radio (or “race radio” as the character called it) in her novel 1959.

“Billie Holiday died and I turned twelve on the same hot July day. The saddest singing in the world was coming out of the radio, race radio that is, the radio of the race. The white stations were on the usual relentless rounds of Pat Boone, Teresa Brewer, and anybody else who couldn’t sing but liked to cover songs that were once colored. . . . White radio was at least honest—they knew anybody in the South could tell Negro voices from white ones, and so they didn’t play our stuff.”

—Thulani Davis, from 1959
Lesson 3 Assessment

1. **Organize Information**  Create a “Who’s Who” chart of popular culture idols of the 1950s. Identify the art form and major achievements associated with each person.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Art Form</th>
<th>Achievements</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
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Why do you think they appealed to the young people of the 1950s?

2. **Key Terms and People**  For each key term in the lesson, write a sentence explaining its significance.

3. **Compare and Contrast**  In what ways were the rock ’n’ roll musicians and the beat poets of the 1950s similar and different? Support your answer with details from the text.

   **Think About:**
   - the values the musicians and poets believed in
   - people’s reactions to the musicians, poets, and writers

4. **Evaluate**  Do you agree with Newton Minow’s statement that TV was “a vast wasteland”? Support your answer with details from the text.

5. **Analyze Effects**  How did radio and television contribute to the success of rock ’n’ roll?

Many African American artists influenced various forms of popular music in the 1950s. Styles such as rock ’n’ roll, jazz, and rhythm and blues at first sold mostly to African Americans. As the sound became more popular, and saleable to white audiences, white singers “covered,” or released their own versions, of these songs. The white singers made more money and gained more fame, while the African American singers failed to attract similar success.

Few examples highlight the influence African Americans had on rock ’n’ roll more than the story of Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton. Her story also shows the lack of credit and compensation they received for their efforts.

In 1953 she recorded and released the song “Hound Dog” to little fanfare. She received a mere $500 in royalties. Only three years later, white artist Elvis Presley recorded his own version of the tune, which sold millions of records. Despite her contributions, Thornton reaped few rewards and struggled her entire career to make ends meet.

At the end of the 1950s, African Americans were still largely segregated from the dominant culture of white America. This ongoing segregation—and the racial tensions it fed—would become a powerful force for change in the turbulent 1960s.
Lesson 4

The Other America

The Big Idea
Amidst the prosperity of the 1950s, millions of Americans lived in poverty.

Why It Matters Now
America today continues to experience a marked income gap between affluent and nonaffluent people.

Key Terms and People
urban renewal
termination policy

One American’s Story

James Baldwin was born in New York City. He was the eldest of nine children and grew up in the poverty of the Harlem ghetto. As a novelist, essayist, and playwright, he eloquently portrayed the struggles of African Americans against racial injustice and discrimination. He wrote a letter to his young nephew to mark the 100th anniversary of emancipation. In his words, “the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon.”

“[T]hese innocent and well-meaning people, your countrymen, have caused you to be born under conditions not very far removed from those described for us by Charles Dickens in the London of more than a hundred years ago. . . . This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. . . . You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason.”

—James Baldwin, from The Fire Next Time

For many Americans, the 1950s were a time of unprecedented prosperity. But not everyone experienced this financial well-being. In the “other” America, about 40 million people lived in poverty, untouched by the economic boom.
The Challenges of Poverty

Despite the portrait painted by popular culture, life in postwar America did not live up to the “American dream.” In 1962 nearly one out of every four Americans was living below the poverty level. Many of these poor were elderly people, single women and their children, or members of minority groups, including African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Native Americans. Rural residents, particularly farmers, represented the poorest segment of the American population.

FARMERS STRUGGLE Although farming productivity increased from 1950 to 1960, the income from farms actually shrank. As foreign countries recovered from World War II, they imported less food from the United States. The prices of agricultural products dropped dramatically.

At the same time, scientific advances led to new farm technology, such as gasoline-powered tractors and other large equipment. This allowed farm owners to operate with fewer workers. As a result, many of the poorest farm laborers, particularly migrant field hands, found fewer opportunities for employment. Many of these displaced workers flocked to U.S. cities in search of a better life. Between the end of World War II and 1960, nearly 5 million African Americans moved from the rural South to urban areas. However, most of the rural-to-urban migrants experienced little improvement in their economic status.

WHITE FLIGHT At the same time that the rural poor were migrating to the inner cities, another large segment of the population was also on the move. Millions of middle-class white Americans left the cities for the suburbs. They took with them precious economic resources and isolated themselves from other races and classes.

Document-Based Investigation Historical Source

Poverty in America
In 1962 Michael Harrington published The Other America: Poverty in the United States, revealing the realities of widespread poverty.

“"The poor get sick more than anyone else in the society. . . . When they become sick, they are sick longer than any other group in the society. Because they are sick more often and longer than anyone else, they lose wages and work, and find it difficult to hold a steady job. And because of this, they cannot pay for good housing, for a nutritious diet, for doctors.”

—Michael Harrington, from The Other America

Analyze Historical Sources
How do you think middle-class, suburban Americans felt when reading Harrington’s descriptions of the poor and their struggles?
The urban crisis prompted by the “white flight” had a direct impact on poor whites and nonwhites. The cities lost not only people and businesses. They also lost the taxes on the property residents had owned and the income taxes they had paid. City governments could no longer afford to properly maintain or improve schools, public transportation, and police and fire departments. The urban poor suffered.

**THE INNER CITIES** While poverty grew rapidly in the decaying inner cities, many suburban Americans remained unaware of it. Some even refused to believe that poverty could exist in the richest, most powerful nation on earth. Each year, the federal government calculates the minimum amount of income needed to survive—the poverty line. In 1959 the poverty line for a family of four was $2,973. In 2000 it was $17,601.

After living among the nation’s poor across America, Michael Harrington published a shocking account that starkly illuminated the issue of poverty. In *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (1962), he not only confirmed that widespread poverty existed but also exposed its brutal reality.

**URBAN RENEWAL** Most African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanic Americans in the cities had to live in dirty, crowded slums. One proposed solution to the housing problem in inner cities was urban renewal. The Housing Act of 1949 was passed to provide “a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family.” This act called for tearing down rundown neighborhoods and constructing low-income housing. Later, the nation’s leaders would create a new cabinet position, Housing and Urban Development (HUD), to aid in improving conditions in the inner city.
Dilapidated areas were razed, and parking lots, shopping centers, highways, parks, and factories were constructed on some of the cleared land. However, there was seldom enough new housing built to accommodate all the displaced people. For example, a barrio in Los Angeles was torn down to make way for Dodger Stadium. Poor people who were displaced from their homes simply moved from one ghetto to another. Some critics of urban renewal claimed that it had merely become urban removal.

Poverty Leads to Activism

Despite ongoing poverty, during the 1950s African Americans began to make significant strides toward the reduction of racial discrimination and segregation. Inspired by the African American civil rights movement, other minorities also began to develop a deeper political awareness and a voice. Mexican American activism gathered steam after veterans returned from World War II. A major change in government policy under Eisenhower’s administration fueled Native American protest.

MEXICANS SEEK EMPLOYMENT

Many Mexicans had become U.S. citizens during the 19th century, when the United States had annexed the Southwest after the war with Mexico. Large numbers of Mexicans had also crossed the border to work in the United States during and after World War I.

When the United States entered World War II, there was a shortage of agricultural laborers. This spurred the federal government to initiate a program in which Mexican braceros, or hired hands, were allowed into the United States to harvest crops. As a result of this program, hundreds of thousands of braceros came to the United States. When their employment was ended, the braceros were expected to return to Mexico. However, many of them remained in the United States illegally. In addition, hundreds of thousands of Mexicans entered the country illegally to escape poor economic conditions in Mexico.
THE LONGORIA INCIDENT  One of the more notorious instances of prejudice against Mexican Americans involved the burial of Felix Longoria. Longoria was a Mexican American World War II hero who had been killed in the Philippines. The only undertaker in his hometown in Texas refused to provide Longoria's family with funeral services.

In the wake of the Longoria incident, outraged Mexican Americans stepped up their efforts to stamp out discrimination. In 1948 several hundred Hispanic veterans formed the American G.I. Forum. They won national attention for their efforts when their Texas leader, Hector P. Garcia, accepted Senator Lyndon Johnson's offer that Longoria be buried at Arlington National Cemetery. The Forum also worked to win full access to military benefits for Hispanic veterans. Meanwhile, activist Ignacio Lopez founded the Unity League of California to register Mexican American voters and to promote candidates who would represent their interests.

NATIVE AMERICANS CONTINUE THEIR STRUGGLE  Native Americans also continued to fight for their rights and identity. From the passage of the Dawes Act, in 1887, until 1934, the policy of the federal government toward Native Americans had been one of "Americanization" and assimilation. In 1924 the Snyder Act granted citizenship to all Native Americans, but they remained second-class citizens.

In 1934 the Indian Reorganization Act moved official policy away from assimilation and toward Native American autonomy. Its passage signaled a change in federal policy. In addition, because the government was reeling from the Great Depression, it wanted to stop subsidizing the Native Americans. Native Americans also took the initiative to improve their lives. In 1944 they established the National Congress of American Indians. The congress had two main goals: (1) to ensure for Native Americans the same civil rights that white Americans had, and (2) to enable Native Americans on reservations to retain their own customs.

Native Americans like this man received job training from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to help them settle in urban areas.
During World War II over 65,000 Native Americans left their reservations for military service and war work. As a result, they became very aware of discrimination. When the war ended, Native Americans stopped receiving family allotments and wages. Outsiders also grabbed control of tribal lands, primarily to exploit their deposits of minerals, oil, and timber.

**THE TERMINATION POLICY** In 1953 the federal government announced that it would give up its responsibility for Native American tribes. This new approach was known as the termination policy. It eliminated federal economic support, discontinued the reservation system, and distributed tribal lands among individual Native Americans. In response to the termination policy, the Bureau of Indian Affairs began a voluntary relocation program to help Native Americans resettle in cities.

The termination policy was a dismal failure, however. The Bureau of Indian Affairs helped relocate 35,000 Native Americans to urban areas during the 1950s. Unfortunately, they were often unable to find jobs in their new locations because of poor training and racial prejudice. They were also left without access to medical care when federal programs were abolished. In 1963 the termination policy was abandoned.
Key Terms and People

For each term below, write a sentence explaining its historical significance in the 1950s.
1. suburb
2. Dixiecrat
3. Fair Deal
4. conglomerate
5. baby boom
6. consumerism
7. mass media
8. beat movement
9. rock 'n' roll
10. urban renewal

Main Ideas

Use your notes and the information in the module to answer the following questions.

Postwar America
1. How did the GI Bill of Rights help World War II veterans?
2. What factors contributed to the American postwar economic boom?
3. How did Truman use his executive power to advance civil rights?
4. What domestic and foreign issues concerned voters during the 1952 presidential election?

The American Dream in the Fifties
5. What shift in employment trends had occurred by the mid-1950s?
6. How were conglomerates and franchises alike and how were they different?
7. How did the membership and accomplishments of unions change during the 1950s?
8. How did life in the suburbs provide the model for the American dream?
9. What positive and negative effects did the mass availability of the automobile have on American life in the 1950s?

Critical Thinking

1. Draw Conclusions In a web like the one below, show the postwar technological advances you consider most influential.

   Breakthroughs

2. Analyze Causes During America’s first two centuries, the national character was marked by individualism. Why do you think conformity became the norm in the 1950s? How did suburban living support conformity and stereotyping?

3. Analyze Primary Sources Do you agree or disagree with the following quotation from Life magazine about American culture in 1954: “Never before so much for so few”? Support your answer with evidence.
4. **Evaluate** After World War II, many Americans chased after their perception of the “American Dream.” Which Americans had the most opportunities to attain this idealized way of living? What opportunities were given to veterans that might have helped them achieve this lifestyle? Did white-collar workers and blue-collars workers have the same opportunities? Explain your answers.

5. **Form Generalizations** How did women’s roles and opportunities in the 1950s differ from women’s roles today?

6. **Analyze Issues** How did television support and promote stereotyping?

7. **Draw Conclusions** In what ways did popular music and literature help bring about the subculture movement?

8. **Analyze Effects** In what ways did mass media impact the American economy?

9. **Evaluate** How effective were the economic policies the U.S. government put into place to fight inflation?

**Focus on Writing**

In 1956 President Eisenhower signed the Interstate Highway Act that led to the construction of a nationwide highway network. Write a persuasive essay supporting the law. In the first part of your essay, clearly outline the benefits created by the law. Include information about the factors that led to the creation of suburbs and planned communities such as Levittown and how those factors were related to the need for new roads.

In the second part of your essay, address the concerns of those who oppose the law.

**Multimedia Activity**

During the baby boom generation, there were many important advancements in science and technology that led to new inventions and new lifestyles for Americans. Write a blog post about a postwar technological change or invention, and explain how it changed American culture. For example, you could write about how the development of microwave relays led to the spread of television and explain the resulting changes to American life. Use the Internet to research a variety of primary and secondary sources to create your post, such as videos, photographs, maps, and first-person accounts.

**Engage with History**

Suppose you are a beat poet who has been asked to write an original poem entitled *A Postwar American Dream*. Use information from the module and your knowledge of American history to support your poem. Remember to include a wide range of lifestyles in your poem.